

As states move toward the implementation of the Smarter Balanced Assessment System in the 2014-15 school year, teachers, students, parents, and the general public are learning more about the advantages of next-generation assessments. However, growing interest in Smarter Balanced can also lead to misunderstandings and occasional distortion of facts. Below are FAQs about the assessment.

Fiction: **These tests represent a new federal intrusion into education.**

Fact: For decades, Congress has required assessments of student learning for accountability under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The 2001 reauthorization of ESEA, known as the “No Child Left Behind Act,” enacted during the Bush administration, expanded those federal testing requirements to include state testing of every student in language arts and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. In 2010, the federal government funded the State of Washington to act on behalf of a consortium of states to develop new, next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards in English language arts/literacy and mathematics. While federal funding currently supports the research and development work of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, all policy decisions about the structure and content of the assessments are made by the member states based on input from stakeholders across the country. At the conclusion of the federal grant in September 2014, Smarter Balanced will become an operational assessment system supported by its member states. The Consortium does not plan to seek additional funds from the U.S. Department of Education.

Fiction: **Nothing is known about these new tests.**

Fact: Smarter Balanced aims for complete transparency. All of the key documents describing the assessment (content specifications, item specifications, item writing training materials, test blueprints, accommodations framework, achievement level descriptors, technology specifications, etc.) are available to the public on the [Smarter Balanced website](#). Practice tests also are available to the general public on the Smarter Balanced website for each tested grade (3 through 8 and 11) and both subject areas (English language arts/literacy and mathematics).

Fiction: **The cost of these tests is unknown.**

Fact: Smarter Balanced has released cost estimates for its assessments that include expenses for ongoing research and development of the assessment system, as well as test administration and scoring. The end-of-year summative assessment alone is estimated to cost \$22.50 per student. The full suite of summative, interim, and formative assessments is estimated to cost \$27.30 per student. These costs are less than the amount that two-thirds of the Consortium’s member states currently pay. These costs are estimates because a sizable portion of the cost is for test administration and scoring services that will not be provided by Smarter Balanced; states will either provide these services directly or procure them from vendors in the private sector.

Fiction: **These new assessments are untested.**

Fact: Smarter Balanced has incrementally tested the content of the assessment and the technology that will support the assessment. Smarter Balanced has already completed:

- ✓ **Cognitive Labs:** Individual students provided feedback to test developers about their experience with the innovative test questions, accommodations for students with special needs, and the testing software.
- ✓ **Small-scale Trials:** Promising types of questions and software features were further tried out with hundreds of students.
- ✓ **Pilot Test:** Students at about 5,000 schools across the Consortium responded to a preliminary pool of test questions and performance tasks.

In spring 2014, the Consortium will conduct its Field Test to present the entire pool of Smarter Balanced items to students across member states. The Field Test is expected to involve students in about 15 to 20 percent of Consortium schools, and will gather the information necessary for final evaluation of item quality.

Fiction: **These tests will result in the collection of intrusive and inappropriate data on children.**

Fact: States will make all policy decisions with regard to the collection, storage, and use of student assessment data. Smarter Balanced will adhere to all federal and state privacy laws, including but not limited to the [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#). The Consortium will not share identifiable student-level data with the federal government. The [Higher Education Opportunity Act \(HEOA\) of 2008](#), [No Child Left Behind \(NCLB\)](#) legislation amending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the [Education Reform Sciences Act of 2002](#), and the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#) all prohibit the creation of a federal database with students' personally identifiable information.

Fiction: **These tests will require advanced technology that schools don't have and can't afford.**

Fact: The Smarter Balanced assessment is being designed to work with the computing resources in schools today. The assessments can be offered on very old operating systems and require only the minimum processors and memory required to run the operating system itself (for example, the summative assessment can be delivered using computers with 233 MHz processors and 128 MB RAM that run Windows XP). Likewise, the file size for individual assessment items will be very small to minimize the network bandwidth necessary to deliver the assessment online. A 600-student middle school could test its students using only one 30-computer lab. To assist states that have not yet made the transition to online testing, the Consortium also will offer a paper-and-pencil option for the first three years of operational testing.

Fiction: **These assessments will result in standardization of teaching and learning.**

Fact: A founding principle of Smarter Balanced is that teachers and students need high-quality data, tools, and resources to support improvements in student learning. Smarter Balanced isn't just an end-of-year accountability test. It is an assessment system that features flexible, non-secure interim assessments to be offered at teachers' and schools' discretion throughout the school year and a digital library of formative assessment tools, practices, and professional development resources built by teachers, for teachers to improve the quality of information collected through the daily classroom activities of assignments, quizzes, and observation of student work. The end-of-year tests will help schools evaluate how well their students performed by comparing their aggregate data with aggregate data from other schools across the nation. The end-of-year assessments also will empower students and parents by providing them with a clear indication of how well their children are progressing toward mastering the academic knowledge and skills necessary for college and career readiness.